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‘That ever-ephemeral sense of “being” somewhere’: Reflections on a Dissertation Festival in Second Life

Clara O’Shea and Marshall Dozier

Abstract

The MSc in E-learning at the University of Edinburgh is a fully online distance programme with around 150 students that have come from around 35 countries. In this paper we discuss the Dissertation Festival which took place in 2011 and was developed as an opportunity for students undertaking their dissertations to reflect on their process, and to share ideas, issues, inspirations and feedback with tutors and peers. The Festival took place in Second Life (SL) on a specially designed island. The island captured the Festival atmosphere with banners, kites, a sunny, meadow-like environment and playful elements like sushi and champagne. Each presenting student contributed a poster, oral presentation with slides, and haiku to this naturalistic exhibition and meeting space. Festival events included a champagne poster viewing session, synchronous presentation sessions and a week-long exhibition of the students’ work. The Festival was more successful than we had anticipated, with participants commenting particularly on its ‘specialness’. We engaged in generative, rich dialogue with participants to explore what this ‘specialness’ was and what it means to be part of a community in an online, distance programme. In our analysis, we explored this further asking what it means to be ‘here’ at the University of Edinburgh and in what ways the Festival encompassed, challenged or shaped ideas of location and identity in distance learning. Our findings suggest that reports of ‘specialness’ related to a sense of community, shared purpose, shared membership, and the celebratory nature of the festival. The roots of this are linked to the wider practices and ethos of the MSc E-learning and specific practices for engagement in SL. We have also identified different layers of cues that helped shape the interactions within the festival itself, from the affordances of the constructed environment, the arrangement of ‘props’ like posters and scripts, through to modelled behaviours, all of which supported a peer-group interaction with a flattened hierarchy.

Key Words: Space, place, virtual worlds, Second Life, presence, connection, community, online learning, distance learning.

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the interplay between a virtual world, programme values, learning community practices and academic identity. It considers the design, development and enactment of experiences within a virtual world, examining how

the materiality of the world and the sociocultural context participants bring *to* and bring out *of* the world support learning for online postgraduate students.

The MSc in E-learning¹ is a fully online, distance programme at the University of Edinburgh, which can be taken full-time, over a one year period, or part-time, over a two to five year period. The programme has around 150 students drawn from 35 countries, most of whom are taking a part-time route and balancing their study with full-time work and a range of other personal commitments. Most students tend to do one course per semester, occasionally with a semester off during a busy work period.

The programme comprises 120 credits of coursework (a 40 credit introductory course, 20 credit research methods course and three 20 credit courses of the students' choosing) and a 60 credit dissertation. The programme has a strong ethos of student participation, one where students work across multiple media and modes of representation² and develop advanced skills in transliteracy.³ The courses tend to be collaborative, dynamic and 'hard fun',⁴ with a high level of pedagogical, technological and pastoral support from tutors and from within the student community. Comments, such as these from the most recent iteration of one of our courses, are typical:

This course offers a great opportunity to mix with people from a wide variety of teaching backgrounds and a chance to share experiences and explore new ideas and reflect on old ones.

For me, the design of the course was as good as the content, and so I was learning at different levels. I gained so much more from this course than I expected – it was an exceptionally positive learning experience.

The programme's core foundation course (*An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning* or IDEL for short) specifically aims to scaffold^{5,6} students' introduction not only to the main technologies they will encounter on the programme, but more importantly, to the ways of thinking and practising in the diverse field of digital education.⁷ During IDEL, students have a personal tutor who helps steer them through this transitional period and offers a range of guidance and advice through the student's personal, private blog space (scaffolding which instantiates Vygotsky's zone of proximal development).⁸ Alongside their blog, students engage in a range of shared activities, some synchronous, others asynchronous (the IDEL course uses discussion board forums, 'twittorials' in Twitter, wikis and synchronous sessions using Skype text, Skype voice, Second Life and video conferencing tools like Adobe Connect or Collaborate).

2. The Problem

By the time students have reached the dissertation stage, they have completed courses which draw differently on a range of digital environments, but which nonetheless take a similar approach to encouraging constructive, critical conversations in and about digital environments. In contrast, then, the dissertation can be a lonely process as students design and carry out their own, individual research projects. Although they have a dissertation supervisor who supports them throughout each stage of their dissertation journey, the sense of shared purpose within courses and the collaborative, community aspect of their learning is diminished as they move to a very self-directed investigation of a personal or professional interest. As one student explained, there can be an element of “‘isolationness” not “seeing” and knowing what others are doing’. Although students may be connected across different media (Facebook, Twitter, and the programme’s own social network site ‘the Hub’), that same student went on to articulate:

It's hard to explain – Some of us [are] on FB, but I feel I'm 'interfering' their time asking about dissertation, where [as] when you face to face and in Uni/education environment, you tend to ask them how their study get on... if you get what I'm meant to say here. :)

Peer interaction and a sense of community are seen to be important in mitigating isolation and leading to greater rates of course completion in online distance learning courses.⁹ So, there are two potential issues at stake in the dissertation process. Firstly, a sense of isolation, and secondly, from that isolation, a lack of opportunity to fully participate in the learning community, to articulate their arguments to peers and tutors, to test what makes for a convincing argument and to benefit from feedback that would come from that interaction.

3. Our solution: The Dissertation Festival

Our solution to this problem was to create an event that included both synchronous and asynchronous elements, that encouraged dissertation students to articulate their arguments in multiple ways (using different genres and modalities), that allowed for a sharing and exchange of ideas in a community space dedicated to the MSc in E-learning programme’s ethos of hard fun.

In creating a space for the Dissertation Festival, we took a sociomaterial approach¹⁰ to our design, and, as will be seen, to our analysis of the events. A sociomaterial approach does not see pedagogy and technology as distinct, rather it acknowledges that ‘the medium *is* the pedagogy’¹¹ that technology is not neutral, and that it is not a collection of decontextualised practices.¹² Instead, technology is another participant in the network, one that is not distinct from the human. To take a sociomaterial approach is to make a shift away from seeing meaning as either

attributed to particular technologies or objects or seeing them as traces of culture; instead it is to see such things as 'continuous with and in fact embedded in the immaterial and the human'.¹³ This kind of approach can help contextualise the learning and social processes that occur in digital environments by acknowledging the role of the material, the way it is entangled with people, practices and purposes and by acknowledging that 'Both the scope and the limits of pedagogic methods are influenced by the media involved'.¹⁴

For us, the sociomaterial approach's emphasis on the way materials participate in the social, and indeed are necessary for the social to be enacted, usefully aligned with the concept of 'affordances'. Gibson¹⁵ coined the term 'affordances' as the relationship between the 'actionable properties' in the environment and an organism. He argues that:

... an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property... [it] cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour. ... An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.¹⁶

For Norman, however, the emphasis is on 'the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used'.¹⁷ Norman, though later claiming his intention was to focus on *perceived* affordances,¹⁸ positions affordances as a property of the thing ('When affordances are taken advantage of, the user knows what to do just by looking'.¹⁹ However, Bloomfield et al make a strong argument for seeing affordances as collective accomplishments, in which the perceived affordances of particular technologies are engaged with by a range of social actors within particular cultural contexts, and where the 'action possibilities emerge out of the ever-changing relations between people, between objects, and between people and objects'.²⁰ For us, this focus on affordances as an on-going exchange usefully aligned with our sociomaterial approach.

As we considered what technologies to use to help create the Dissertation Festival, it was clear to us that Second Life²¹ – as a place that has been used for tutorials, Christmas parties and virtual graduation – might act as contextual cues, prompting particular possibilities for action, and play a role in shaping emergent behaviours at the Festival. In designing the space and activities of the Dissertation Festival, we took advantage of the relationship between the affordances of the material and the interaction of the community.

4. Methods

Before turning to a detailed discussion of the Dissertation Festival design, process and analysis, it is useful to take a moment to discuss our methodology.

However, it should be noted that we did not set out to do a formal research project when we set up the Dissertation Festival: we initially sent emails to Festival participants to get feedback on whether the Dissertation Festival had been of benefit and might be improved, and we asked about place and space because of a separate concurrent project.²² It was only when participants' initial responses indicated that something 'special' had happened that we decided to follow up the feedback more deeply and look systematically at participants' experiences. Not having designed a specific methodology into the project in advance, we therefore have taken what has been described as a 'generic qualitative' approach.²³ With the aim of being utterly clear in our approach, we have followed the stipulation of Caelli *et al.* to state explicitly our theoretical position, how we have 'congruence between methodology and methods,' how we have tried to achieve rigour, and finally our 'analytic lens'.²⁴

We have taken a constructionist stance in this piece of research, with the 'view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context'.²⁵ In line with this constructionist stance, our qualitative approach has allowed us to gain insight into participants' experiences and views of the event, recognising that each person will have an equally valid and probably different perspective. As is described in more detail below, the bulk of the data were generated by semi structured interviews with open-ended discussion, consistent with an aim of exploring participants' individual experiences and thoughts. We used thematic analysis²⁶ to generate conceptualisations of the participants' experience of the Dissertation Festival, bringing rigour to the themes by testing and re-testing the emergent themes initially as part of the interviews, and then in three separate iterations of coding by the researchers. As discussed in more detail below, we have used a sociomaterial approach as an analytic lens informing the thematic analysis and interpretation.

A. Dissertation Festival participants

There was a total of 18 participants over the week who attended events or left comments on student work, not including the two authors (who were the Festival organisers): four student presenters, eight student attendees, five tutor attendees and one external attendee not associated with the programme. Most participants only attended one or two of the synchronous sessions. There may have been other visitors to the event space who did not leave artefacts of their presence (and we did not use a visitor tracking script).

B. Consent

At the beginning of their time on the MSc E-learning programme, students are asked for permission to use suitably anonymised materials generated on the programme as research data (this includes forum postings, assignments, and discussion transcripts). Permission to use the external participant's input was sought by email along with the interview questions. Permission to use data that emerged in a non-programme forum (e.g. Facebook) was sought as it appeared.

C. Data generation

Following the Dissertation Festival, the four presenters and seven of the attendees (six students and one tutor) responded to email interview requests. Interviewing by email allowed us to have multiple asynchronous dialogues with respondents living in different time zones, and permitted reflective discussions between the researchers and the individual respondents over periods of up to a few days. Other studies conducting interviews by email have shown that email is an effective way of interacting with difficult-to-reach participants²⁷ and of exploring complex issues.²⁸ We consciously took an active approach to the email interviews, aiming 'to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that might occur to all interview participants'²⁹ by engaging not just with follow-up questions, but by testing and inviting ideas, interpretations and conceptual links so that the respondents were also active in constructing meaning. We took the stance that meaning-making would come from the interactions between interviewers and interviewees,³⁰ that the account of the Dissertation Festival would be jointly assembled. The initial emails asked three broad questions:

1. What worked and what could we do better for next time?
2. Did the Festival help at all on your MSc journey?
3. We're thinking a little bit about notions of space and place – that a distance learner's sense of location and connection to an institution is perhaps differently felt or imagined than campus-based students. Is there anything in that idea you can relate to your experience of the Festival?

Although we acknowledge that our questions could be considered 'leading', we argue that interviews of this type are not intended to be neutral information gathering techniques³¹ and that it is through the responsive, conversational and joint exploration between interviewers and interviewee that rich meaning-making can be achieved.

Additional, unanticipated, data from social media were collected and utilised. Triggered by the experience of attending the Dissertation Festival, dialogues (with three presenters and one student attendee) about the dissertation process emerged in Facebook and the programme's blog site.

Images of the event were taken as either screenshots or in-world pictures by the researchers and participants. While Prosser and Loxley³² distinguish between these two types of visual research data (researcher-created and participant-created), we took all images as *community created*, seeing, as we do, both ourselves as researchers and members of the community taking part in the Festival. The chat texts in SL were logged automatically and saved for analysis, as is the case for most tutorial transcripts across the programme.

D. Data analysis

Each author separately looked through all the data and developed an initial set of themes; we then discussed the emergent themes, agreed on thematic categories that felt most relevant, developed hierarchical groupings and merged some themes. After we agreed on the thematic categories, we returned to the data sources for fresh examination and interpretation. Some themes had been identified as areas of interest in advance (notions of space and place), a few had emerged during the active email interviews but most themes came out of the author analysis. Themes and concepts that had early testing in the email interviews were re-tested in this process. The coding was managed using the online qualitative analysis system Dedoose.³³

5. Dissertation Festival design

A. The Programme in SL

The MSc in E-learning has a specific allocation of land within the wider University of Edinburgh SL presence, known as 'Holyrood Park'.³⁴ This land is a peninsula away from the main University area, with branching areas designed as natural, open and welcoming tutorial spaces such as a forested space with logs around a fire, a beach tent made with a high roof and colourful gauze, a flower garden with a circle of cushions and an open air cafe. This pastoral design intentionally avoided replicating 'Real Life' edifices in a virtual world, where enclosed rooms and lecture halls are unnecessary, to encourage us all to re-think what constitutes a learning environment.

All students on the programme have a scaffolded, two week introduction to SL, which includes basic orientation sessions, optional building sessions and text and voice tutorials. The space is then used throughout the programme, not only as a tutorial space in some courses (using either text or voice), but also as a place of programme-wide events and celebrations, such as alumni seminars, Christmas parties and virtual graduation.³⁵ The multiple uses and naturalistic setting blur the formal/informal distinction that might be more clearly demarcated in other programme spaces, such as our VLE.

The physical campus can be symbolically and materially significant for online students. Research with our own students³⁶ has shown that online distance students

'need their own version of the "spatial certainties" of bounded, campus space' and that 'The university, like any "object" is always enacted across multiple topologies, "dependent for [its] constancy on the intersection of different spaces" (Law, 2002: 98)³⁷ Within our programme, one apparent constant is the SL campus. As one of our interviewees explained:

The Holyrood Park space in SL has come to feel like the primary, and most 'authentic', meeting space on the MSc. I say most authentic because it feels more so than with video conferencing, say for example with Wimba. There is something static about video conferencing, in that there is no feeling of shared space, and freedom of movement within it. SL seems to create a sense of ease through emulating the three dimensions of the real world. I think this is also entirely related to the aesthetic design of Holyrood Park, but also at a fundamental level, it is the sense of embodiment and place that makes it instinctive.

B. The Festival space

We felt the Dissertation Festival required a space both a part of and apart from the usual tutorial spaces, creating a familiar but unique space for this one shared purpose. We raised a small island just off the peninsula and landscaped it in a similar naturalistic way, with a wildflower meadow theme. Bunting, fluttering kites in the shape of koi fish, and flowers all helped set the festival tone.



Image 1 – Dissertation Festival Island

Posters, haikus and slideshow presentations were clustered in free-floating circular frames that glowed with a gentle, semi-transparent colour unique to each presenter. To a certain extent, the poster objects emulated the familiar poster display section of real-life conferences or academic building-corridors.



Image 2 – A Poster Cluster

At one end of the island, visitors were greeted with bunting that declared the nature of the space (*The MSc in E-learning Dissertation Festival 2011*), as well as a small information point that offered a notecard with a more detailed explanation about the Festival and a timetable of events. At the other end of the island, a number of logs were clustered near a large floating screen where the presentations would be given. The logs could be formed into a circle or a very loose row-like configuration, depending on the needs of the specific events. Also at this end of the island was a table laid out with fruit, sushi and champagne which visitors could help themselves to and eat or drink by ‘wearing’ as ‘attachments’ to their avatar.

The intention with each of these design choices was to exploit the affordances of SL and of specific objects. For instance, the logs controlled avatar poses (as all such objects can do in SL) so that avatars appeared to be sitting in relaxed and informal styles. The clusters for each student’s work ringed the perimeter of the island, offering a sense of boundary without excluding the possibility of panoramic views of the sea or across to the main programme space. Our hope had been that this specific configuration of objects and their affordances alongside the familiar use of the space for tutorials (and special events like end-of-semester parties or virtual graduations), would help create an atmosphere of celebration – of a shared

but also excitingly new space that brought programme members together for a unique reason. Afterwards, one student who presented work noted:

I think that Marshall's design had a lot to do with the non-stress environment – it would be interesting to see if having lines of wooden straight-backed chairs has an effect. It may also have something to do with how the avatars sit / slouch / loll when seated – none of that looks very formal at all

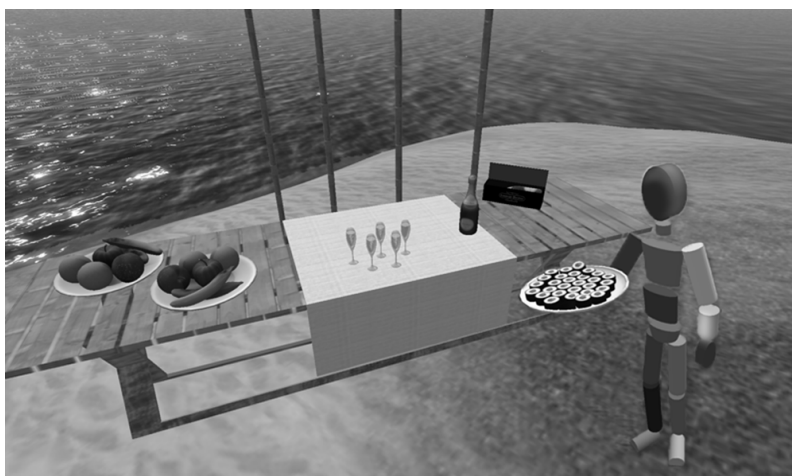


Image 3 – Virtual Champagne and Sushi

C. The Festival activities

The Festival focused on synchronous events that emulated real life seminar presentations of research in progress. The first of these events was a champagne poster viewing session to start the Festival (on the Monday). This was followed by a dialogue on dissertations - a roundtable chat between current dissertation students, tutors and other students on the programme about the dissertation process. This ranged from debriefing the research process, queries about writing up and brainstorming ideas for research for would-be dissertation students. The final event type was a presentation session in voice with complementary chat. There two presentation sessions, each which included a 10-15 minute presentation by one student, followed by discussion on their presentation, and then another 10-15 minute presentation by a second student, with conversation afterwards.

We did have an asynchronous element for the week of the Festival: each cluster of student materials (poster, presentation and haiku) included a comment board,

where visitors could leave brief thoughts, questions and ideas that the student could then respond to later. Each comment was visible to the public. Several attendees came to view the displays and leave comments outwith the synchronous events.

This series of events was designed to encourage engagement with other students and tutors. This is a key factor in students developing their 'academic literacy'³⁸ or 'connoisseurship'.³⁹ By this we mean, as Royce Sadler⁴⁰ outlines it, coming to understand quality, what makes a 'good' dissertation in this case, in a way similar to that of the programme tutors. For this, as Hounsell argues, 'practice in recognising and judging work of varying standards is indispensable',⁴¹ more so than simply seeing exemplars of good work or model answers. Instead, opening up the process of creating a piece of work, feeding back on the work-in-progress and doing so for an array of work in various stages of readiness may engage students more in the exercise of their judgement and the developing understanding of 'quality'. In thinking about how to create this kind of opportunity for our students, we were inspired by more traditional, face-to-face events for postgraduates such as departmental poster conferences, presentations and seminars and by the argument that multimodal work can encourage new ways of thinking about arguments.⁴²

6. Experiences of the Festival

The Festival was well attended, given the size of the programme, with dissertation students, students not yet at the dissertation stage, tutors and an external visitor attending events. The champagne poster viewing session was a busy occasion, with festival go-ers discovering the space together: the opening minutes of chat were peppered with comments and a sense of delight at each event, such as 'oo pancha, can I have some sushi?', 'I love the "kites"', 'already at the champagne i see' and so on.

The 'dialogue on dissertations' which kicked off the week was lively, with current dissertation students discussing their experience and asking tutors and peers for advice about the write up. Students at the coursework stage also found this dialogue useful, with one saying that after the summer break she was 'feeling all MSc-y again'. A student presenter said:

The session did feel like a group of friends rather than a formal lecture-situation even though I've only met one person (Clara) once – it felt a lot like the friendship I found in the message boards (but on steroids)

Four students presented their dissertation work, each at a different stage of progress. The oral presentations had many elements of a traditional seminar, including introduction and moderation of the event by the authors and approximately ten minutes of oral presentation followed by 20 minutes of discussion with the audience.



Image 4 – Student Presenting

Each presenting student was asked to send a haiku, a poster, and the slides accompanying their oral presentation, all of which were used to create an exhibit for each student's project. Each element was chosen as a complementary way of facilitating students' development and communication of the ideas – and areas of uncertainty – in their project. The haiku, being a mere 17 syllables long, challenged students to identify the very heart of their argument. The poster allowed students to give a deeper exposition of their aims, methods and findings thus far, considering the diagrammatic relationships in their work. The oral presentation with slides was an opportunity to discuss context, methods, findings, concerns and to seek feedback from audience members. This example haiku nicely captures the essence of the research question and also findings:

Online MBAs
teach leadership skills ... don't they?
It's all in the blend.

Our intention had been for all participants to use voice (presenters and audience). However, the affordance of text chat, and, we suspect, the informal and playful atmosphere developed during the events, created an adaptation of the traditional face-to-face seminar presentation format. As the presenters spoke, audience members used the text chat to indicate agreement, disagreement and those non-verbal cues not implicitly communicated online. These included nods, laughs (of the 'me smiles' or simply 'LOL' variety), or comments on the presentation ('that's quite a population!'), 'grounded theory approach then' or 'transcription

sucks!'). The text chat effectively substituted for body language that a presenter can use as a cue in a face-to-face situation, as one of the students in the audience observed:

It's a most unnerving experience on teleconferences when you are talking and everyone else is absolutely silent. I hate that! Having a little text ticker showing that people are listening and understanding is kind of like the proof and reassurance that the RL people behind the avatars aren't AFK [away from keyboard] or bored.

The audience also started asking questions in the text chat ('how did you choose those 6 people?', 'did they get offered "lack of opportunity"?'). Some presenters chose to engage with these questions and comments during the presentation while others relied on the Festival organisers to collate them and raise them during the discussion session. These text comments were not unidirectional – participants also responded to one another's comments, creating something akin to a twitter backchannel at a conference. Text became a way to both make up for perceived missing physical cues but also of exploiting advantages of the technology. Although there was tutor concern this use of chat might undermine presenters' 'flow', the presenters themselves said things like:

I think using voice and instant messaging worked really well, allowing a kind of back channel for comments. This also allowed the speakers to ad lib a bit in response to comments, which made things quite dynamic. In fact, I thought that the SL presentation format worked so well, I wondered why more of the courses on the MSc didn't utilise this idea.

7. Did the Festival address the problem?

This is a difficult question to answer. As discussed above, the two primary aims of the Festival were to address an isolation that students in the dissertation phase of the programme can feel, and to give opportunities for students to develop their work by discussing and getting feedback. Of the four students who presented, two submitted their dissertations at the next submission deadline, two realised they had further work to do and chose to aim for a later deadline. All four spoke well of the Festival. For those close to submission, it was a chance for affirmation, fine tuning and making connections with others. For those further from a deadline, the chance to articulate their work multimodally, to present their arguments and to engage in conversation with others helped them realise the work that lay ahead. For other students, tutors and visitors, the Festival was a chance to reconnect with an academic community, engage in ideas and dialogue, and have a little fun (and

sushi). Finally from a programme perspective, the Festival did create an opportunity for participative, multi-modal, collaborative community building based on furthering academic connoisseurship and transliteracy that we believe marked a turning point in the way we address the dissertation process.

In some ways, it was this communal engagement that seemed the most successful element of the Festival. Participants referred to the 'specialness' of the festival, and there was a suggestion that the space of the festival transcended into a 'place'. Is there a way to 'capture' this specialness? Was it a result of design or implementation? Would the Festival still be 'special' with another cohort? And what does this tell us about location, identity and community online? We think the sociomaterial approach might help theorise and understand why this particular aspect of the Festival worked so well.

8. Transforming a 'space' into a 'place'

A sociomaterial approach⁴³ can reveal some of the dynamics which transformed a 'space' into a 'place', providing a useful lens through which to examine the 'specialness' of the Dissertation Festival. 'Space is not the equivalent of "place"',⁴⁴ for while space can be sedimented and static, place is dynamic and multiply produced. Place, as Al-Mahmood⁴⁵ discusses, is space endowed with meaning and significance. Place comes into being through the enactments between the different aspects of the network, both human and non-human. As Sheller and Urry argue:

Places are thus not so much fixed as implicated within complex networks by which hosts, guests, buildings, objects, and machines are contingently brought together to produce certain performances in certain places at certain times.⁴⁶

Though pre-SL, Massey's articulation of place also helps open up the dynamic and deeply contextualised nature of place, moving it from bounded notions of space to:

articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent.⁴⁷

For the Dissertation Festival, various elements of pre-existing networks were brought into this space and were part of the development of a sense of place. These included the general ethos of the programme, the previous uses of SL (as an informally formal, collaborative space) which influenced the expectations around interaction and practices, and the previous experiences individuals had of SL.

However, our design intentions, both in building a specific locale in SL and in developing the activities of the Dissertation Festival, are not enough to turn a *space* into a *place*. Space turns into place through how people interact with the environment, place emerges from the dynamics of the sociomaterial.

What struck me about the festival was the fact that I *felt* I was giving a *real* presentation to other people. This was reflected in the fact I felt bothered that my back was to the audience whereas I wanted to have "eye" contact, even though other people's eyes were very virtual. So there was something quite powerful and immersive about the space and the experience, which was perhaps enabled by purposeful activity in SL rather than something more open ended and unstructured.

This response of one of the presenters suggests the successful creation of 'place', while also flagging ways that that 'place' was created – 'real', 'immersion', 'purposeful activity' – in other words a shared space and a shared purpose. We would also add another dimension – a sense of shared time – to explain how space is transformed. While there is clearly a complex interweaving between these three elements, addressing them individually will highlight particular aspects differently.

A. Shared space

I think having a shared virtual space definitely helps to give a sense of a shared experience which transcends physical location – something that wouldn't happen if the poster information for instance was simply e-mailed to each student. There is a sense that having a location is somewhere that you can 'hang your ideas and thoughts' which wouldn't be possible otherwise.

As previously mentioned, the space in SL was designed to take advantage of various elements of programme experience to act as behavioural cues in this new unique space. The Dissertation Festival area echoed the naturalistic setting of the rest of Holyrood Park, but had distinct elements of its own, such as the bunting and koi kites. This lent the area a sense of authenticity, through its physical and visual kinship with the 'campus' of the MSc in E-learning, but just as crucially, gave it a uniquely bounded space, opening different possibilities for interaction and engagement. The sense of joint discovery of the space, evidenced through the banter around champagne and sushi, sowed the seeds of a shared sense of the space. Though possibly trivial in themselves, these interactions begin to illustrate the multiple ways that SL as a platform allowed interaction and expression of self: presentation of an avatar, movement within – and interaction with objects within – the 3D space, and the use of text chat as a backchannel during the oral

presentations allowed people more individual freedom and more opportunities to engage than other spaces like the virtual classroom referred to earlier by one of the respondents, Wimba, might allow.

[F]or me the medium is a vehicle or space where presence can be experienced. If I just log into SL and visit, say, the festival space on my own, in that eerie sort of way, I feel no presence at all, but bring others into the space with whom there is some relationship or rapport, and the feeling of presence "happens". For me, I think the feeling of co-presence makes a difference to feelings of "real".

This echoes the argument that spaces need interaction to become places. While there are cues which suggest particular interactions with the space – informal seating, celebratory signals, past programme SL experience – a specifically Dissertation Festival community is not automatically formed by entering the space. Garrison and Anderson suggest that two key aspects of developing a community (in their case, a community of inquiry) are social and cognitive presence; that is, the extent of construction and confirmation of meaning through reflective discourse and the ability to project one's self socially and emotionally.^{48,49} It could be argued that the shared experience of 'realness' and 'specialness' participants reported experiencing in this space was not one to do with the environment per se, but in the way the environment allowed for social and intellectual engagement to emerge.

B. Shared purpose

This combination of intellectual and social interdependence, in which students and tutors came together to collaboratively support the development of meaning making is dependent on 'purposeful activity'. Garrison and Anderson describe this as a community of inquiry, one in which tutors and students transact 'with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that will lead to further learning.'⁵⁰ These transactions can function to decrease a sense of distance and increase a sense of community through dialogue, through the amount the learners exercise control over the cognitive space.⁵¹

In this respect, community is not one bounded by space (though we would argue that the community is still shaped by it), but emergent from the way in which members are connected in their values, interactions, practices and history⁵² and in their shared passions and interests.⁵³ Importantly, community activity is also about enculturating members into the ways of thinking and practicing in that community. For newer members, or legitimate peripheral participants as Lave and Wenger⁵⁴ might describe them, learning is not just about engagement in specific events but

about 'a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities'.⁵⁵ For this specific community, these practices focussed around developing student's confidence, academic interests and connoisseurship, as these students who presented explain:

Presenter 1:

Questions from others really helps me thinking about the way I do the study, what analysis I should consider, etc...

Presenter 2:

The other thing that was really valuable was finding out what other people were doing. For me, the networking aspect was one of the most valuable bits of the process. Had I not taken part, I would not have made contact outside of SL with [student] or [visitor], both of whom share similar interests professionally.

It's always tempting to think that what you're doing has pretty little value, but other people's feedback was great for confidence building.

Interestingly, unlike Garrison and Anderson's community of inquiry,⁵⁶ or Lave and Wenger's community of practice,⁵⁷ the community experienced during the Festival was one with a relatively flattened hierarchy. The smooth, informal and amorphous space of SL undermined the striated and hierarchical learning spaces one might find in a virtual learning environment.⁵⁸ The fluidity of avatar looks (where gender and species changes are just a matter of 'changing outfit') and the ambiguity of avatar identity (where names are rarely linked clearly to 'real life' identities) created a hierarchy that was fuzzy. The focus was not on *who* was saying what, but *what* was being said. One presenter described this fuzziness:

I found that I like to know who the avatars belong to but after knowing I don't put their faces to the avatar (does that make sense?) – I deal with the avatar as a "being" in itself rather than as the real person in disguise. That could be because I'm dealing with everybody during the course as text and discussion rather than as a physical being I meet regularly.

A student attendee noted:

It's nice to just pitch straight in to talking about interesting stuff, the articles etc. and then the self disclosure can come in little asides or jokes in the conversation.

As is the nature of smooth spaces, this flattened hierarchy extended rhizomatically,⁵⁹ opening up participation in the Festival to those without a clear connection to the programme and inviting them to engage in the community. As one visitor explained:

I just finished my master's degree and I miss being exposed to the kind of knowledge sharing that I experienced at your festival. Exposure to an intercultural collaborative learning environment was very inspiring.

However, there was an element of risk to this openness, as meeting (or the idea of meeting) other people in the space, on occasion, brought discomfort, particularly outwith the scheduled synchronous presentations:

Reading presentations or leaving comments was always p[r]one to encounters with other presenters, participants or members of the public, and this added an element of risk.

In this respect, the presentation space in SL was more exposed than the imagined departmental conference that inspired the Festival:

The permanence, coupled with the sense of public exposure in the space felt important here, in that the work could be visited at any time, but also that any exploration was itself an anonymous experience.

It could perhaps be argued that the more shared the experience, the more risk may be felt when allowing others into the created 'place'.

C. Shared time

We have argued that a shared space and a shared purpose come together to create a community, a pre-requisite in the creation of 'place', of 'specialness' and 'real' interactions. There is an additional element threaded through the previous sections which complicates and extends this creation – a sense of shared time. The importance of interaction and community strongly favours synchronicity to help achieve a stronger sense of 'hereness'. In SL, a shared time can add to the sense of a shared space, in a way that for instance, simultaneous communication on a discussion forum, may not. Two students explained:

Student 1: The SL meetings and stuff like Skype have all helped me feel I'm occupying the same 'space' as my colleagues and that we really 'know' each other and have met.

Student 2: [I]t's always good to meet up in a shared synchronous space with interesting people.

Garrison and Anderson also argue that immediacy is key to establishing social presence, and that such immediacy is lacking in an e-learning context.⁶⁰ For them, immediacy is key to establishing a supportive social presence, where personal risk is softened by the security of the learning environment. For us, shared time is a great deal more than synchronicity or immediacy, however. We argue that shared time does not necessarily equate with a sense of temporal instantaneity; instead it is associated with the socio-intellectual interdependence aspect of community and meaning making. In this view, shared time becomes less about a clock and more about a sense of continuing social and cognitive engagement. This argument draws on Lombard and Ditton's notion of the 'perceptual illusion of nonmediation'.⁶¹ Here, 'perception' refers to the human sensory, cognitive and affective processing systems and the 'illusion of nonmediation' to the perceptual failure to recognise that a medium exists or is mediating their interaction. Lombard and Ditton argue that although all experience is mediated, this definition particular refers to technology, that which 'comes between' us and our environment. Lee usefully summarises their definition as 'The degree to which users logically overlook the mediated or artificial nature of interaction with an entity within a medium'.⁶²

A feeling of being present is what lies at the heart of this definition – how much a person feels as if they are 'there' compared to their physical space.⁶³ One presenter wrote,

The questions were also much harder to ignore (if they were difficult) than in Skype or message boards because the person who asked it is sat / stood in front of you

– although, as we all recognise, 'the person who asked it' was many miles away and represented by pixels on the computer screen. It is a subjective perception 'generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology'.⁶⁴ While the user may know, in some way at some level, they are not 'there', their main experience is as if they were engaging with the environment, objects and people and the technology was not involved or shaping those experiences.⁶⁵

The aim of shared time is linked to Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow as 'the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement'.⁶⁶ While it might not be as all-consuming as Csikszentmihalyi's concept,⁶⁷ there is certainly

an element of an engrossed involvement in activity, of focussed concentration where time becomes distorted and the activity is gratifying in and of itself. When the barriers to engagement are low (when the technology runs smoothly, when the participants feel they are competent users of the technology) and the intellectual and/or social engagement is high, participants report experiences that speak of authenticity, specialness and what we might see as 'flow'. The mediated nature of the interactions, even when that mediation is a part of the interactions (such as text chat), seem a part of the flow. Importantly, this flow, or shared time, comes not from one individual being engrossed in their solo activity, but in the engagement of the many, with shared purpose and shared practices.

D. Barriers to shared time and space

One way to examine the importance of shared time is to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in its ephemeral nature. Disruptions to this perceptual illusion of nonmediation or flow were multiple for some of our attendees, undermining their experience of the Festival as a place to 'be there'. For students with equipment or connectivity issues, participation was also seriously undermined. Lack of familiarity with the user interface (it may have been years since the student had taken a course with a large SL input), alongside the complexity of the environment, also created a barrier to participation for some. One student presenter, less practised in the SL environment, said:

... my machine could not cope with SL requirement. And also my familiarity with the control is very poor, so I found it frustrating when I can read the posters/powerpoint properly. So this is nothing got to do with you but just an 'individual error' or 'user error'.

Warburton identified eight barriers to using SL in education,⁶⁸ and it is notable that the most fundamental, technical, barrier still presents a problem to students on the programme. Though at a more extreme end of the scale, this participant was not the only one who found difficulties: others needed a bit of reminding and coaching on various relatively basic ways of effectively manipulating their avatars within the virtual environment.

Existing in multiple spaces also disrupted the sense of 'being there'. While 'at' the Festival, participants were also in multiple environments simultaneously. One student audience member described how being present in multiple spaces impacted on engagement:

But using SL on a laptop at my inlaw's house was not like that. I had lots of inputs from the real world – I could hear voices next door, smell cooking from the kitchen, feel the breeze from the

window and see the rest of the room that I was sitting in etc, so in a way the virtual work and the real world were competing for my attention. I can see how it is possible to be so focussed on what is happening in SL (or in a game maybe) that you block out all of that, but I think it is hard to achieve...it is hard to be completely present in SL because the brain is getting other inputs from real-life.

As Boellstorff notes, 'In virtual worlds, "virtuality" refers to sociality, not the senses.'⁶⁹ yet it is clear that, for this student, the senses performed an important role in how 'there' she could be.

E. Complications arising from shared time

Even if the physical world and technological issues were removed as barriers to a sense of shared time, there is a crisis inherent in its creation. While it immerses the participant more deeply, creating a tighter knit community who feel as those they have been part of something 'special', shared time is, inevitably, fleeting. Indeed, this ephemerality may be part of why it was considered special, but it also made it more exclusionary. One student, who could only attend the Festival asynchronously, noted:

I was unable to attend the day of the event and suspect I may have missed something by not being there for the live presentations.

Students living in time zones or with lifestyles incompatible with the timing of the presentation sessions may have felt that the lack of connectedness and non-involvement in the classroom that Rovai argues can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.⁷⁰ In this respect, the strongly synchronous nature of the Festival risked exacerbating the original problem that it was intended to solve.

9. Conclusion

In a dynamic and participatory programme, the transition from coursework to individual research is one that can provoke feelings of isolation and a lack of a supportive and familiar community. Individual research can also leave students with fewer opportunities to articulate their developing academic arguments and to engage with others' work as part of their growing understanding of what constitutes quality in academic work. The Dissertation Festival was a successful intervention for this particular set of problems, creating a safe community space for the interchange of ideas and the development of academic ways of thinking and practising. As one student presenter said:

I felt connected to all of the audience, even those I did not know from my studies – it may be that I think of the Uni area of SL to be a “safe place”?

Articulating dissertation ideas multimodally and seeing others' work at different stages of production enabled students to better understand the possibilities for creating and judging good quality academic discourse.

However, the most interesting thing about this intervention was the way it was perceived by attendees (students and tutors alike) as 'special'. One tutor attendee explained their enjoyment of the Festival thus:

I think for me it was that ever-ephemeral sense of 'being' somewhere. More so than at virtual graduation (though maybe I'm just used to that now). Being somewhere with other people, working on a shared task that couldn't have been done any other way. Lovely.

What made for this particularly engaging atmosphere? We have argued that 'specialness' comes not from a particular moment or thing, but from an approach that opens up and acknowledges all elements, social and material, that turn a space into a place. The Festival took advantage of students' previous experiences with SL while creating a new opportunity for engagement based around a familiar but unique shared space. There was a distinct and collaboratively produced shared purpose within that space, and joint sense of immersion and non-mediation bringing the 'flow' of shared time. We suggest that the richness of the Festival cannot be attributed to singular, specific technologies or programme practices, but to the emergent meaning and significance created through the interactions between the material and the social. In this respect, 'specialness' is an enactment any online, distance programme could achieve if it takes this kind of contextualised, sociomaterial approach.

Notes

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